

THE SECRET
LIFE *of*
WISHFUL
THINKING

LINDY DEKOVEN

LAKE UNION
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PROLOGUE

It was the most humiliating day of her life.

Yet, it had started off so well.

A limo picked Kenzie Armstrong up at the Regency Hotel at precisely eleven o'clock in the morning to deliver her to Avery Fisher Hall at New York's Lincoln Center. She slipped into the backseat and quickly began rehearsing her keynote address, entitled "The Hollywood Studio: Reinventing the Strategies, Platforms, and Revenue Streams," for the annual Ad Age Digital Media Summit. She'd gone over it repeatedly, memorizing exactly what to say, where to pause, and when to emphasize a point.

"Miss Armstrong, there's water in the side pocket and snacks in the middle console." Fernando, her driver, took great care of her. Ordinarily she'd tear into the small bags of Dylan's candy he'd carefully placed near the water. But not today.

"I'm not the least bit hungry, Fernando."

"Not even the peanut butter pretzel bites? Oh, you must be anxious."

Fernando winked in his rearview mirror, and she smiled back.

“Anxious is putting it mildly. I’m terrified. This is the biggest audience yet, and there’s a lot at stake.”

“You’ll be fine, Miss Armstrong. You are what your name says. Strong. Very strong.” Fernando drew to a stop, then turned around and smiled.

Kenzie forced a smile back, hoping it looked self-assured and confident.

But she was scared shitless.

They pulled up to the back entrance of the auditorium. Waiting outside was a young production assistant with the name *Charlotte* on the clear plastic tag that hung from her neck.

“Much good luck, Miss Armstrong. You’ll do great,” Fernando said as he opened the door to let her out.

“Thank you, Fernando. I’ll meet you back here after my speech.” Fernando nodded as Charlotte grabbed Kenzie’s garment bag and ushered her inside.

A petite brunette with freckles, Charlotte told her they had little time and then whisked her off to a dressing room. As they approached, Charlotte pointed to a black nameplate next to the archway. There was her name: *Kenzie Armstrong*. Engraved in white lettering. Kenzie immediately thought to take a photo to send to her mom. She’d be so proud that—

But reality set in. These moments were the worst—those flickers in time when Kenzie forgot, just for a microsecond, that her mother was gone.

Six months ago, her mom had succumbed after a long battle with leukemia, and Kenzie was still struggling with the loss. Almost everything upset her. The aroma of lilacs in bloom brought back the memory of her mom’s favorite hand lotion. Bakeries reminded her of her mother’s burned cookies at bake sales. And sometimes just the sight of a middle-aged woman with a particular hair color, or a certain build, or a familiar expression could bring her to her knees.

Kenzie knew it was the order of things, but still she wondered why she got to live and her mom had to die. The pain remained fresh. Kenzie seemed stuck at the first stage of grief.

At twenty-eight, Kenzie was the youngest executive at a major Hollywood studio. Her ascent had been swift after she'd created a social media campaign for a low-budget Fox film the studio had already written off. When it surged to number one opening weekend and stayed there for weeks, beating one superhero after another at the box office, the entire industry was stunned. Suddenly she was the flavor of the month—and one without a contract. The big brass at Victory Studios swooped in and offered her a position and salary no one her age could resist.

Today was her coming-out party. Her public debut to the film, TV, and digital communities. She'd made speeches before, but none at this level. The audience included Wall Street power brokers, high-ranking advertisers, digital media experts, techno-junkies, and the media elite. This was an important event.

She'd prepared for weeks. She wasn't going to make a single mistake. She'd even replaced the rubber soles on her heels to avoid tripping across the stage. The unseen audience watching on TV and live streaming the event might be in the millions.

While Charlotte waited outside her dressing room, Kenzie changed into her black knit skirt and matching jacket. Her blond hair was wrapped neatly in a bun at the back of her head, and a few wispy bangs graced her forehead. She probably looked more like a nun than a marketing maven.

A knock sounded. "Miss Armstrong, you have ten minutes," Charlotte said outside the door. Kenzie pictured her staring at the clock in the hallway. She took one last glance in the mirror, straightened her suit, checked her makeup, applied a little more lip gloss, and took a deep breath. This was it. She was ready.

Charlotte led Kenzie down the hall and into the wings alongside the stage. Kenzie peered out from the curtain at the crowd. The theater was enormous. Every seat was occupied. Her knees weakened.

The cacophony of voices filled her head. Her lips trembled slightly, and her right eye began to twitch. Charlotte said Kenzie would be on in five minutes and offered her water, which she declined. Instead, she felt the need to run to the restroom.

As Kenzie raced to the ladies' room, she heard Charlotte marching close behind. Charlotte would suffer the consequences if Kenzie didn't get to the stage on time. From inside the restroom, Kenzie heard Charlotte whispering updates into the mic attached to her headphones. Washing her hands, she heard Charlotte shout, "Three minutes!"

But when Kenzie opened the bathroom door, Charlotte was frantic. Kenzie had already been introduced. The audience was applauding her arrival. She grabbed Kenzie's hand and yanked her out of the restroom and across the hall, back into the wings. What had seemed like a short walk before felt like a journey of a thousand miles now. Frenzied and out of breath, Kenzie ran after her, trying not to lose her balance in her heels or trip across the cables that lined the corridor. Charlotte grasped her arm and jerked her back and forth like a rag doll as they flew toward the stage.

Kenzie said, "I thought I had three minutes."

Charlotte yelled, "No, I made a mistake. One minute. Not three!"

They reached the arena, and Kenzie leaped onto the platform. The auditorium rumbled as she took the stage of the magnificent theater. A round of applause greeted her entrance, and Kenzie's ankles wobbled.

She managed to catch her breath, slow her pace, smile broadly, and then calmly walk toward the podium at the center.

The lights shone brightly on her face. The room was a sea at night. Dark and vast. She squinted to see if she could make out a single face, but she couldn't. All she could see was the illumination of the teleprompter with her opening words waiting to be read.

Kenzie began the speech, which felt as familiar as her name. After a few moments she began to relax. She talked about her plans to propel Victory Studios to the top of the industry in the digital and social spaces. She revealed the Twitter handle for their new film, *Sydney's Monkey*, and then moved out from the podium and turned her back to the audience so she could point to the digital orangutan on the jumbo television screen erected onstage. She announced that the studio had already earned more than two hundred million engagements across social media platforms.

As she walked back to the podium and plunged deeper into her talk, she grew more confident and at ease. She remembered to speak slowly and to use her hands for emphasis.

But from the moment she took the stage, she'd thought she heard suppressed laughter from the audience. She wasn't sure what it was about. Maybe she was imagining it. Her speech wasn't funny. In fact, it was incredibly dry, full of numbers and big words. So she ignored it and kept going.

But the laughter grew louder.

And then, out of nowhere, a stage manager appeared at her side. He whispered something in her ear that she couldn't make out. Then he stepped behind her and gently tugged at her skirt.

Kenzie's heart fell through the pit of her stomach and to the floor.

In her rushed departure from the restroom, her skirt must have become entangled in the waistband of her thong—her shocking-pink thong, she remembered—exposing her entire rear end. It had been on display from the moment she took the stage and was

featured in all its glory when she turned her back to the crowd just moments ago.

Kenzie stared at the audience, her face on fire.

People began to howl. They applauded, cheered, and heckled.

She felt the cool breeze of the air conditioner on her neck. A single bead of perspiration trickled down her left temple. A strand of hair had come loose from her bun and hung awkwardly behind her ear.

She was hot and sweaty. Her chest caved and her mouth was dry and desperate for water. Her cheeks felt warm. She started to lose her balance but quickly grabbed the podium with both hands.

She fought to get past the humiliation. She knew she had to move on. Pretend nothing had happened. Make a joke. Laugh. At herself. With others. Rise above it. That was what she should do.

But she couldn't.

Kenzie, c'mon, you can't just freeze. You have to do something. Anything. Open your mouth. Keep going. After all, the show must go on. It always goes on. Doesn't it?

But instead she stood motionless, gaping at the audience. A tear slid down her left cheek. Jumbled thoughts raced through her head. How could this happen? Where was Charlotte?

The audience had grown quiet and still, but Kenzie couldn't move. Her arms were locked on either side of the podium. Her neck worked hard to support her head, which seemed as heavy as a bowling ball. Her whole body was stiff and tense. She brushed away the tear, which had settled on her upper lip.

While the audience waited patiently for her to continue, she drew in the stink of stale dust and worn-out sneakers that permeated the auditorium and wondered why she hadn't noticed it till now.

Kenzie learned later that the video of her bare butt on the stage of Avery Fisher Hall had already gone viral at that point. In fact,

it had spread from Stockholm to Sacramento and on to Shanghai before the stage manager had even approached her. YouTube had gathered over five million hits in just a few hours. The morning talk shows, the cable networks, tabloids, talk radio, and the late-night comedians were already preparing gags and showing the clip, with her rear end blurred for broadcast, over and over. By the end of the day, millions of people in all twenty-four time zones had seen her defining moment. During her speech she'd observed tiny bright flashes from cell phones, but, of course, had failed to realize their significance.

When she was hired at Victory Studios, the critics claimed she was too young and inexperienced to assume such a lofty post. Despite her reputation as a tough warrior and fierce competitor, many believed she was too green for such responsibility.

As she stood stone-faced, gazing into the audience and unable to go on, Kenzie began to wonder if, in fact, they were right.

KENZIE

Four Years Later

“Hey, tootsie, what’s the plan?” Leo DiSanto stormed into Kenzie’s office, trailing the scent of freshly mowed grass from the paddock. “We gotta do something special for opening day. Something big. Gotta get new fans. Wanna put Grayson Downs on the map. Whaddya got?”

Kenzie glanced out the sliding door that opened onto the paddock where the horses would be saddled and paraded when Grayson Downs Racetrack in Palmdale, California, opened in just six months.

For the past four years she’d been happy to begin each morning working on the track’s backstretch as a hot-walker, leading racehorses around a ring until they cooled out following a race or workout. Then she’d give them baths before returning them to their stalls. It was quiet and peaceful. The horses’ calm, accepting nature soothed her, and no one relied on her for anything except taking care of the animals.

But two weeks ago Leo had offered her a position as director of marketing for the track. Anyone would have been thrilled to say

yes, but not Kenzie. Had she not been down to her last dollar, she never would've accepted.

She hoped she could handle the stress. She didn't want to become overwhelmed with anxiety and endure another panic attack. The one she experienced onstage four years ago had destroyed her career and nearly destroyed *her*.

"I'm working on it, Leo." She hoped her voice didn't sound as uncertain as she felt.

"Ya gotta think of something," Leo pushed. "It's time to get moving, tootsie."

Before Thong-gate it had been Kenzie's time.

Back then she was a different person. Wildly ambitious. Referred to as the "Energizer Bunny," she'd wanted to run the world. Featured in magazine stories, gossiped about, she was on her way. She was going to have it all.

And then it was over.

Life had changed.

From the time she was a child, Grayson Downs had always held a special place in her heart. Max, her maternal grandfather, had taken her mother and her here often over the years. Grandpa Max was a racetrack regular, always looking for the next big score. For Kenzie, Grayson outings were magical in a different way. While Grandpa Max stood in line to place his bets, anxiously watching the horses and the tote boards, Kenzie and her mom watched the races, talked about life, and shared stories, unconcerned about winners and losers.

Grayson was a refuge, a place she found exciting but also tranquil and relaxing. Even now she could shut her eyes and smell the grass, the hay, the musky, earthy scent of the horses. It was as if her mother were there again, sharing an ice-cream cone, pointing out details about every single horse, pulling Kenzie to her feet to cheer with her at the top of their lungs for ones with the longest odds.

“It’s easy to applaud the winners,” her mom used to say. “But who encourages the ones who are down on their luck?”

But as soon as Kenzie opened her eyes, reality sank in. Those days were long gone. Along with her mom.

She blinked to clear her blurred vision and saw that Leo had perched on the edge of her desk, a layer of skin squeezing up over his too-tight pants and hanging over the waistband as he leaned too close, pressing her for an answer.

“Can it wait till Monday?” Kenzie hedged. “I’m about to meet my friend Gemma for dinner. But I’ll have it all for you then.”

“Okay, tootsie, but we need to get chicks to the racetrack,” Leo said. “Why don’t you get that new person I just hired for you to help bring in the gals—ya know, that Indian girl?”

“Leo, she has a name. It’s Sarita. I don’t think she likes it when you call her ‘that Indian girl.’”

“Let’s call her Rita. That’s good, dontcha think? Need to Americanize it.”

Kenzie tapped a pencil on her desk, her heart pounding as she debated whether to share the out-of-the-box idea she’d had. “I’m thinking about . . . Well, I’ve been thinking about a women’s expo,” she offered hesitantly.

Leo’s fleshy face scrunched up on itself. “Really? What the heck are we gonna do with a women’s expo?”

Kenzie cleared her throat, feeling her face heat. “Well . . . I was thinking maybe free manicures, massages, career experts, various other services that women might enjoy.”

“And what does it have to do with the track?” Leo asked.

She shrugged, feeling foolish. “Nothing. I mean, not really. But the idea is to get women here, right? Isn’t that what you want?”

Leo’s thick lips were pursed, and his eyebrows drew together like mating caterpillars. “I don’t know. Sounds like a lot of work, and it’s just you, me, my assistant Glenn, and your gal Rita till we bring

on more staff in June when the racetrack officially opens.” He stood up, giving her what Kenzie felt sure was meant to be an encouraging smile, if it hadn’t been threaded with condescension. “I tell you what, tootsie. Why don’t you mention it to Brynne Tomlinson and get her input? She owns the most horses in training here. She may have some ideas, okay?”

Kenzie nodded numbly, wishing she’d never mentioned the idea.

* * * * *

“I’m wondering if I should quit my job,” Gemma Haskins said as Kenzie approached the table inside the restaurant. “That’s why I wanna see Annalisa tonight.”

“Oh no. That’s why we’re meeting here at Johnnie’s? So you can go next door and see your psychic?” Kenzie asked, sliding into the booth. It had been a long day, and Kenzie was glad that she could just sit and relax with her best friend, whom she’d known since college. Gemma was always looking for someone to give her the answers. It was literally how they met—when Gemma asked Kenzie how to make a cappuccino at the café they both worked at one summer.

“Yes. I need some good news.”

“Well, she’ll give you lots of that, as long as you line her pocket with bills,” Kenzie said. “Come on, Gemma, it’s a sham. Don’t you get that she’s just taking your money?”

“Look, times are tough. I’m thirty-three, can’t get promoted, and my love life sucks.”

Kenzie shook her head but held her tongue. Gemma never seemed to get the breaks so many others did. If the psychic offered some kind of hope, some kind of opportunity for her, then fine.

Gemma ripped through her meal and wrote notes to herself to make sure she had all her questions for Annalisa, then checked her watch.

“Oh, time to go. Wish me luck!” Gemma tore out of the booth.

“I’m gonna grab dessert next door,” Kenzie called after her. “Text me when you’re out of there. I’ll wait for you.”

“Sure thing. Fingers crossed!” Gemma shouted as she raced outside.

Kenzie paid the bill, walked next door, and ordered a small cup of chocolate frozen yogurt with chocolate sprinkles. She watched as a young man and woman nibbled on each other’s cones. The woman was pretty, with delicate features. Her boyfriend was handsome, with an affable grin. Kenzie watched as they gazed into each other’s eyes, and wondered if she’d ever feel that way about anyone.

She’d had only one serious boyfriend, Scott Semple. They hadn’t spoken since they broke up her junior year in college, but he’d friended her on Facebook recently. Now he was a car salesman in Yuma, Arizona. Married. Two kids. He and Kenzie had gone out for maybe a year, and then he’d dumped her when he’d met Alison James. A bimbo, in Kenzie’s humble opinion, but Alison was better suited for Scott. Kenzie’s ambition had turned him off. It turned a lot of guys off. She wanted to work, to have a career. It was the twenty-first century, after all. But she was left with zero male prospects. In fact, she had been so busy building her career and then taking care of her mom, Kenzie hadn’t dated in so long she wasn’t sure she’d even know what to do.

She ate the remaining chocolate sprinkles in her cup, tossed it into the metal can by the door, and returned to her beat-up black pickup truck, which was a far cry from the fancy BMW she’d driven in her previous life. She knew Gemma would be finished soon, so she sat in her truck and played *Flappy Bird* on her iPhone. Just as

she was about to start a new game, Gemma burst out of Annalisa's Psychic Lounge wearing a huge grin.

"I got a fantastic reading! So excited," she shouted. She jumped into Kenzie's truck, which had been waiting by the door. "Can you drive me to my car? It's on the other side of the parking lot."

Kenzie started the ignition and put the truck in gear, unable to resist smiling at Gemma's enthusiasm. "Okay, so what did she say?"

"Oh my gawd, it was unbelievable."

Kenzie rolled her eyes. Gemma had a flair for the dramatic. Kenzie was pragmatic, businesslike, and levelheaded, whereas Gemma was more starry-eyed and idealistic.

"I know you think this is crazy, 'cause I saw your eyes roll, but according to Annalisa, I'm gonna get a promotion soon." Gemma sorted through the contents of her purse, looking for something. "Let me find my notes so I can read her exact words to you. Something about seeing me in a big office, no longer someone's assistant. Lots of people want to meet me. Dang it, where are they?"

Kenzie backed out of her parking space. As she did, the door to Annalisa's Psychic Lounge opened again, and a heavysset woman shuffled out the storefront. She had frizzy gray hair and was wearing a white caftan and silver gladiator sandals—and she was moving quickly toward them. The woman flapped papers, trying to get Gemma's attention. Kenzie stopped and waited as the woman she presumed was Annalisa staggered over to the driver's window. She was having a heck of a time walking and was out of breath.

"Yo, Jenifah," she said in a gravelly voice. "Your notes. You forgot 'em." She reached across Kenzie's chest and handed the papers to Gemma. Kenzie couldn't believe Annalisa didn't even know Gemma's name.

Annalisa grabbed the frame of the driver's side window to stabilize herself. She was so winded she could barely get the words out. "The good stuff . . . the good, is in here."

Gemma smiled broadly and blew her a kiss.

Suddenly, Annalisa's hand fastened itself to Kenzie's arm.

Kenzie tried to pull away unobtrusively, but Annalisa's grip was like steel. "Okay," she said uneasily. "That's great. We're gonna head home now."

Annalisa lowered her head and peered through the window into the truck, still clutching Kenzie's arm too hard.

"Your ring," Annalisa said. "Where . . . where did . . . you get that . . . that beautiful ring?"

"Oh, this?" Kenzie looked at her right hand, which was on the steering wheel. "Um, well, thank you. I found it on the beach. There was no lost and found. I put it on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, but no one claimed it."

"It's lovely," Annalisa said. She finally let go of Kenzie's arm, but then reached inside the window to take hold of Kenzie's finger, examining it closely. Kenzie shifted uncomfortably, trying to catch Gemma's eye. But Gemma was staring in equal fascination at Kenzie's ring.

"Looks like an amethyst, pearl, and a beautiful peridot . . . Whew . . . Quite a find." Annalisa inspected it carefully, as if she were a jeweler.

"Really? Uh, I don't think so." Kenzie laughed. "I think it's fake. I saw one like it at the 99-cent store. But thank you."

Annalisa released her finger and then placed her hand on Kenzie's shoulder. She leaned in close. Her face was about an inch away from Kenzie's. She stared directly into her eyes, which Kenzie found unsettling.

"I'd . . . take good care of that ring . . ." Annalisa was breathing heavily. "It belongs . . . to him . . . to your future husband."

"What?" Kenzie asked.

Annalisa released her hand from Kenzie's shoulder and took a step back from the truck. She was ghostly pale and continued

to gasp for breath. Kenzie asked if she was all right. But Annalisa didn't respond. Instead, she closed her eyes and tilted her head back toward the sky.

"He'll come . . . into your life . . . He will . . . sometime . . . sometime in the next six months," Annalisa said. And then she stumbled backward and collapsed to the ground.

"Annalisa!" Gemma cried.

* * * * *

"She *died*?" Kenzie almost dropped the sack of groceries she'd been carrying the last two blocks from the market to her apartment.

"Last night on the way to the hospital," Gemma sobbed. "I was her last client. Maybe it had something to do with me."

"I doubt it. She couldn't breathe." Kenzie held the phone closer to her ear. "I'm really sorry. I thought that when the paramedics arrived, she'd be okay."

"Me too," she said. "I feel terrible."

"Oh, Gem," Kenzie said. "I know how much you liked seeing her."

"I did. I'm going to miss her," she said. "She got nearly everything right. I came to depend on her. Even you benefited from her abilities."

"Really? How?"

"She said your ring belonged to your future husband and then croaked. I mean, God—what're you going to do?"

Kenzie reached the ancient white-stucco apartment building on her narrow, tree-lined Pasadena street and hiked up the artificial grass staircase to her studio apartment on the second level. This place didn't come close to the elegant condo she'd owned in West Los Angeles, complete with a concierge and doorman. But it was a different time. She placed the grocery bag on the kitchen counter

and tossed her purse onto the metal end table that came with the four-hundred-square-foot dive. Then she crashed onto the gray couch that would serve as her bed later that evening and stared at the cottage-cheese ceiling, clutching the cell phone to her ear.

“About what?” Kenzie asked.

“About finding your future husband! Don’t you want to?”

“Seriously?” Kenzie pulled herself up from the couch. She went to the fridge and grabbed something to drink. “It was a ridiculous thing to say.”

“Really? Why?”

“Well, for starters,” Kenzie said, gulping down the flat Diet Coke that had been sitting, opened, in the refrigerator door, “unless my future husband is five years old, I can’t imagine him wearing a ring that came out of a gumball machine.”

“Annalisa didn’t think it was a cheap ring,” Gemma said.

“Annalisa didn’t know what she was talking about.”

“Did you take it to a jeweler?”

“No, that never occurred to me.” Kenzie returned to the fridge.

Gemma was quiet as Kenzie opened the fridge door again and saw one lonely tomato.

“Aren’t you even curious?”

“Not really. You know I don’t believe in that stuff.” Her tone was curt, matter-of-fact.

There was a long pause.

“It’s a suffragette ring,” Gemma announced.

“Huh?”

“I found an image of a ring that looks like yours online. I’m texting it to you now.” Gemma could barely contain herself. “Look at it. It’s the same one, isn’t it? It looks like an amethyst, pearl, and peridot in eighteen-karat gold. Just as Annalisa said.”

Kenzie looked at the photo. Gemma was right. It sure looked like the same ring.

“Wow.”

“Get off your butt,” Gemma said. “It’s Saturday. Let’s go see Harriet at XIV Karats and get this thing appraised. My boss gets his wife’s bling there. Or rather, I pick it out and he gifts it. Let’s see what she says. Meet ya there in an hour, okay?”

Kenzie had so many errands to do, but she had to admit that Gemma had piqued her curiosity.

She wondered what the heck she’d found.

* * * * *

Gemma and Kenzie met at the jewelry store and learned that the ring was real. The design had first appeared in the 1890s, but it wasn’t produced for the campaigners to wear until 1918, when the first women were enfranchised. The green stones stood for hope; white, for purity; and violet, for dignity.

Kenzie was speechless as she listened to Harriet Fuller, a sophisticated African American woman in her forties, explain more about the ring and its history. Harriet said interest in suffragette jewelry had increased and prices had risen.

Kenzie slipped the ring back on her finger and thought about whose it might be. It was a suffragette ring. But why would it belong to a man? Harriet wrote down the name of a woman who was a feminist historian and encouraged Kenzie to contact her to learn more about the ring.

“Boy, you have all the fun,” Gemma said as they exited the shop. “I get a reading about a possible promotion, and you get one about your future husband.”

“Hey, you’ve worked really hard and deserve a promotion. At some point you’ll get one. It’s not that hard to predict. That’s why psychics are scam artists. They listen to what you want and just repeat it back in a different way.”

“Don’t be such a skeptic.”

They walked to Kenzie’s truck, parked down the street. When they approached her parking space, Gemma took Kenzie’s hand and softened her tone. “I want you to try to live a little, Kenz. You’ve been walking horses around a shedrow at Grayson for four years, and now you’re director of marketing there. It’s an exciting time. You should wear that ring more often. Maybe it’ll bring you good luck.”

“Well, I’ll need some luck in this new job. It appears the pressure’s on me.” Kenzie took out her car keys.

“Why on you?” Gemma asked.

“Richard Grayson III, the track’s owner, wants to tear it down and build a commercial development. Leo begged him to reconsider and promised he’d increase attendance, draw a younger crowd, and figure out a way to attract more women.”

“Ah, that’s where you come in.”

“It seems like a tall order for a track that’s only open the first three weeks in June, and part of the Antelope Valley Fair and Alfalfa Festival next door.”

“The what?” Gemma laughed.

“It’s a small track. Accommodates seventy-five hundred fans. But they’ve only gotten about nine hundred a day the past five years. Has to be improved or the place gets knocked down. There’s no turf club. No restaurant. Just a few hot dog vendors. Let’s just say it’s nothing like Churchill Downs.”

“Well, you have quite a challenge. But you know that track well.”

“I do. Aside from working there these past few years, for me it holds wonderful memories.” Kenzie kept her eyes on Gemma and then lowered them. “I spent many good times with my mom and grandpa there.”

“Well, then Leo hired the right person.” Gemma rested her hand on Kenzie’s shoulder. “If anyone can turn this around, you can.”

“Thanks for the support. But, you know . . . I’m a little scared . . . Like, what if I can’t do this?” Kenzie asked softly.

Gemma squeezed Kenzie’s arm. “You can do it. You’re good at this.”

“I hope so, but I haven’t gotten all my confidence back.”

“You’ll get there,” Gemma said. “Meanwhile, how about giving me a lift to my car? It’s uphill and I’m feeling pretty lazy today.”

They got into the truck and pulled out of the parking space. While Gemma opened her compact and put on lipstick, Kenzie glanced at her friend’s dark-brown shoulder-length hair and billowy white blouse tucked neatly inside her midrise jeans. She always appeared fresh and immaculate.

Kenzie did not.

Her sweater was frayed and carried the scent of the track. Dirt collected at the hem of her jeans, probably from the walk on the backside yesterday. And she hadn’t applied makeup since this morning. As Kenzie watched Gemma smack her lips, she wondered if all this primping was about seeing *him* later. Gemma was obsessed with him. She didn’t want to ask, as it had become a sore subject. In fact, she didn’t know if Gemma had seen him at all. But she didn’t want to broach the topic.

Gemma took the keys out of her purse as Kenzie pulled her truck up alongside Gemma’s car.

“Glad you insisted that I come out here today,” Kenzie said. She leaned across the console and hugged Gemma good-bye.

“I know you don’t believe in psychics,” Gemma said as she reached for her purse and jumped out of the truck. “But just keep an open mind, okay? I mean, you never know. She could be right.”